

Integrative Learning: Putting the Pieces Together Again

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Abstract: As one means to combat the dis-integration of the undergraduate experience, the authors make a case for the kinds of integrated education needed to prepare students to respond creatively and with commitment to our society's most critical challenges.

Essay:

In her talk at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities in New Orleans this January, Sister Helen Prejean, native of that city and author of *Dead Man Walking*, called on educators to provide students a "total human education." After all, what short of this could prepare them—or any of us—to cope with an event as widely devastating as Hurricane Katrina? Indeed, participants at the meeting had many opportunities to see and hear about New Orleans' slow, painful reconstruction. Marvalene Hughes, president of Dillard University, opened the event with a heartrending, heart-lifting account of that historically black university's physical, academic and spiritual rebuilding—and its struggle to assure its future. The city itself has less than half the population it had before the storm, and is faced with decisions nearly overwhelming in their difficulty.

And that's the point. Conference participants could not have had a better reminder that democracy's big questions (the meeting's theme) are breathtakingly complex, and that to engage them constructively, people need to develop the capacity to connect. For colleges and universities, the educational implications are clear. Breadth and depth of learning remain hallmarks of a quality liberal education. But if we want to prepare students to compose responsible lives in a world in which we are *all* at least figuratively "In Over Our Heads" (as psychologist Robert Kegan puts it), depth and breadth are no longer sufficient. According to the AAC&U's new report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, integrative learning should be considered an "essential learning outcome."

To be sure, there's a sense in which all learning is integrative, if only because new ideas must somehow connect to prior ones. When educators single out integrative learning for special attention, however, they are usually talking about larger leaps of imagination—about linking ideas and domains that are not easily or typically connected. You are familiar with the varieties:

- connecting knowledge from multiple fields and sources, as many faculty did, for example, in impromptu or "emergent" teaching on Hurricane Katrina
- applying theory to practice in various settings, as all the professionals involved in the reconstruction of New Orleans are called to do
- utilizing diverse and even contradictory points of view, as the moral, civic and political challenges involved in rebuilding the city's damaged institutions require
- understanding issues and positions contextually, in order to counteract the tendency toward what Milan Kundera calls "provincialism: the inability (or the refusal) to imagine one's own culture in the larger context"

A student in a mathematics and English learning community at the College of San Mateo got the point. Integrative learning, he said to his teachers, means "tying things together that don't seem obvious."

How to help students tie these threads—and tie them well—is the challenge. Most theories of intellectual development construe the ability to integrate knowledge as a relatively sophisticated skill, one which develops over time and requires considerable effort and experience to attain. For example, Benjamin Bloom placed synthesis near the "top" of his Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, while William Perry argued that the capacity for synthesis develops as students progress through varieties of dualism and relativism to arrive—if they ever do—at the capacity for commitment in the face of uncertainty. Whatever the particular typology, it would appear that students need multiple opportunities to learn and practice the arts of integration throughout their college years.

Fostering integrative learning, then, involves broad-based campus change. Although integrative skills can (and should) be taught within particular courses, departments and institutional divisions, the fact is that students take more than one course in more than one department; integration cannot by its very nature be pursued effectively in any single course or program. Indeed, the most promising initiatives for integrative learning are focused on finding strategic points of connection, threading attention to integrative learning throughout (and between) an institution's various programs and encouraging students' own efforts to connect the dots.

Fortunately, the higher education community is gaining significant experience in designing such initiatives. The 10 campuses participating in the [Integrative Learning Project](#), a three-year initiative sponsored by AAC&U and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, offer ample evidence of this. Several focused on strategic sites in general education: the first-year experience, senior capstones or the middle years—especially important to transfer students. Some campuses chose special programs, like learning communities and study abroad. Still others painted their canvases

institution-wide: helping faculty design assignments aligned with common liberal learning outcomes; integrating cross-cutting literacies into the full arc of a student's education; scaling up an e-portfolio program to offer more students this tool for integrating academic, personal and community life.

Walter Isaacson, biographer of Ben Franklin and vice-chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, gave the closing plenary address at the AAC&U meeting. Franklin, like New Orleans' leaders today, struggled with one of democracy's biggest questions: When do you hold true to principles and when do you compromise? His answer, Isaacson said, was always to compromise—except when the result would tyrannize others. We may not have many Ben Franklins in our midst right now, but higher education does have a responsibility to help form leaders skilled enough in integrative thinking to wrestle with the issues, at once moral, civic and environmental, that face us today.

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